

French youth riot against police brutality in Amiens-Nord

Antoine Lerougetel
16 August 2012

Violent clashes between youth and police took place on Sunday and Monday nights in the Amiens-Nord council estate in the industrial town of Amiens in northern France. Only eight days before, Interior Minister Manuel Valls had designated it one of France's 15 Priority Security Zones (ZSP).

Dozens of cars were torched, burning barricades of dustbins set up, a primary school partially destroyed by fire, and a local police station ransacked. This caused an estimated €1 million (US\$1.23 million) in damage. Seven cars were torched on other estates in Amiens.

The estate was built in the 1960s and 1970s and is home to some 15,000 people, many of them of North African origin. Like many similar estates throughout France, it has an unemployment rate of more than 50 percent for people under 25 and a long history of police repression. It has seen revolts in 1989, 1991, 1994, 1999 and 2005.

A key election campaign pledge of Socialist Party President François Hollande was to set up 45 zones where a heavy police presence will be permanently deployed.

Since July, detachments of *gendarmes mobiles* police have patrolled the estate, but clashes intensified until on Sunday the BAC (Anti-Criminality Brigade) attempted to arrest a driver in the estate for allegedly driving the wrong way on a one-way street.

The police claim that when a hostile group of youth approached they had to use tear gas to protect themselves. A nearby group mourning the death of young Nadir Hadji, who had died two days before in an unrelated motorcycle accident, was hit by tear gas and

then subjected to a police check.

Sabrina Hadji, Nadir's sister, told *Médiapart*: "At about 11 p.m., the BAC checked a young man who was there for the mourning. It wasn't just any check, it was a provocation. It degenerated, the police set on my uncle and my father. The CRS [riot police] came and said, 'Your gang leader, your pimp is under his tombstone.' They gassed us and shot rubber bullets with women and children there. We're not animals."

A few skirmishes took place that night, but the following night, angry youth took on the hated CRS who had been drafted into the estate. Some 100 youth hurled projectiles and fireworks in three hours of running battles with 150 police, who claimed that they had also been hit by buckshot.

Sixteen policemen were reportedly injured; no arrests were made.

The riots testify to the social gulf separating the political establishment and its security forces from the working class throughout Europe and internationally. As unemployment and social austerity continue to mount after four years of deep economic crisis, popular opposition to police brutality and economic oppression takes ever more explosive forms.

The police killing of an unarmed father of four in Tottenham, London sparked rioting in Britain by thousands of poor working class youth between August 6 and 10 last year. It was savagely repressed by the state, with a massive police crackdown and makeshift trials.

In France itself, social tensions are rising rapidly as the newly-elected Socialist Party (PS) government of President François Hollande continues the law-and-order, budget-cutting policies of Hollande's discredited predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy. The economy is stagnating, with the national unemployment rate topping 10 percent amid an ongoing wave of mass sackings and factory closures, including in the northern industrial region around Amiens.

Hollande and Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault have responded by denouncing Amiens-Nord residents and promising to boost the police forces. Ayrault said he "brought his support to the policemen and all the state services," denouncing the "unacceptable" events in Amiens and promising "the greatest firmness against the perpetrators."

Saying that his thoughts went to police in Amiens, Aix and other cities affected by violence, Hollande promised "supplementary funds for the *gendarmerie* and the police.... More personnel will be brought in, whereas for many years unfortunately the number of police went down."

Interviewed on Tuesday morning on radio *France Info* before a scheduled visit to Amiens-Nord in the afternoon, Interior Minister Valls made clear the PS government's determination to continue its unpopular policies. Defending the repressive action in Amiens-Nord, he insisted on imposing "Republican law-and-order." He added that the government could not let up on social austerity.

Unsurprisingly, when Valls arrived at Amiens-Nord under massive police protection to meet with local officials, he was booed and jeered. He met the family of Nadir Hadji but was unable to tour the neighbourhood as planned, only passing by the damaged Voltaire primary school in a car.

He insisted, "There is no justification for shooting at police or burning public property.... I will absolutely not allow people to pass judgment on the police."

Libération reported that Nadir Hadji's mother and sister "emerged from their interview with the minister as angry as when they went in. His mother explained, passing on the words of the youth and also many of the people of the neighbourhood: '[Valls] only talked

about the injured policemen, saying that it was intolerable. He's not interested in the fact that the police treat us like animals. They gassed us, sent projectiles against us. That's why the youth in the neighbourhood are angry.' "

An Algerian worker who regularly visits his mother on the estate told the WSWWS that he deplored the deteriorated state of social relations on the estate. Public money had been spent on certain social projects over the years, but the profound sense of social alienation had not been eliminated. He was particularly critical of the government of former PS Socialist Party President François Mitterrand, which in 1982/1983 (the start of his austerity policy) had funded youth gang leaders to control the estate. They had become an oppressive and corrupt militia lording it over the inhabitants.

In 2005, the death of two youths electrocuted in a substation while hiding from police sparked three weeks of nationwide riots—the worst urban unrest in France in 40 years. The Gaullist government of then-President Jacques Chirac imposed a three-month state of emergency. Unrest in working class estates in France has continued, notably with the 2007 crackdown on riots against police in the Paris suburb of Villiers-le-Bel.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact